

**JOURNEYS INTO THE GARDEN  
OF SEXUALITY:  
THE VOICES OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITY IN PASTORAL CONVERSATIONS**

by

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I declare that *Journeys Into The Garden Of Sexuality: The Voices Of Women's Sexuality In Pastoral Conversations* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research project arose from an awareness that many Christian women experience female sexual desire and the expression of sexual pleasure within a religious context to be a forbidden subject and that they are consequently isolated in silence. The social construction of sexuality within the history of Christianity was briefly explored to see which discourses underpin current constructions of White Christian female sexuality. This feminist, participatory action research project challenged the silence on women's sexuality by inviting three women to narrate their personal stories of sexuality. With the help of narrative therapeutic practices, some of the dominant social and religious discourses that constitute White Christian female sexuality were challenged and explored. This research project aimed at the co-construction of narratives of sexuality that will hopefully be life-giving to Christian women's experiences with sexuality.

## **KEY TERMS**

Christianity, women, sexuality, sexual desire, sexual pleasure; sexual intercourse, social construction of sexuality, feminist discourses; patriarchal discourses; narrative therapeutic approaches

**Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism:  
that which is most one's own, yet most taken away.**

**(Catherine MacKinnon quoted in Graham 1990:192)**

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

It may be helpful to readers to understand how I saw the terms that I use(d) in this research project. I applied the definitions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, as formulated in its article on *Human sexuality and the Christian faith – Episcopal edition* (1991). These definitions resonate with my general way of speaking and my understanding of these terms as well as those of the participants.

**‘Human sexuality’** is far more than ‘sex’ (popularly used to refer to sexual intercourse), although it includes that. Sexuality cannot be reduced to specific acts, urges, or drives. It is an aspect of who we are as human beings, whether or not we engage in activity that is considered ‘sexual’. Our sexuality involves our way of living in the world as male and female persons. We are bodies created by God, sensual and sensuous human beings who yearn for relationships with others.

**‘Sex’** (on its own), as the term is used in this study, refers to the anatomical differences between males and females.

**‘Sex’** (I used this term as a shortened version of ‘sexual intercourse’ in order to promote readability, for example, in ‘pre-marital sex’ instead of ‘pre-marital sexual intercourse’, ‘extra-marital sex’ instead of ‘extra-marital sexual intercourse’.)

**‘Sexual intercourse’** is used to refer to those intimate acts of sexual attraction, expression and union that involve the genital organs and which can lead to a sexual climax.

**‘Gender identity’** is based on a biological distinction and is more culturally conditioned. The term refers to how we perceive ourselves and how we live out or express our identities and roles as males and females. A person's gender identity or role is not always synonymous with his or her biological sex.

Our predominant sexual attraction to one gender or the other – or to both – is our **‘sexual identity’**. (Some researchers prefer to use the term sexual orientation, but since listening to gay people, I believe that ‘identity’ is a

better word. Most gay people say that they have felt the way they do since they can remember. It is part of who they are. The word ‘orientation’ implies choice and potential for change. For most gay people, their sexual identity is not a choice, but a given.)

I also used the following terms. These definitions are my own. The definitions are provided to enhance the possibility of consensus regarding the meaning of these terms (as used) between myself and the reader.

**Life-giving** – any action or discourse that promotes or results in a constructive experience for or influence on an individual or a relationship at an emotional/spiritual/physical or intellectual level.

**Life-denying** – any action or discourse that demotes a person’s sense of self or results in a destructive experience for or influence on an individual or a relationship at an emotional/spiritual/physical or intellectual level.

**Life-restricting** – any action or discourse that demotes or devalues a person’s sense of self or results in experiences for or influences on an individual or a relationship which prohibit or limit the possibility of constructive growth or experiences at an emotional/spiritual/physical or intellectual level.

All live-giving, life-denying or life-restricting experiences or discourses would be determined as such by the context(s) of the persons involved and their understanding of such an experience or discourse.

## **FOREWORD**

In this study, I have drawn on my personal experiences as a woman and as a local preacher in the Methodist Church.

As a pastoral therapist-in-training, I engaged in therapeutic conversations with members of the congregation of the church where I serve. My perceptions were based on my experiences and my understandings as they were informed by these pastoral conversations. At a personal level, I included my own perceptions that were shaped by my social interaction with my friends and my family, as well as my sense impressions, thus an intuitive sense or awareness. One of these sense impressions was that there are several constituting discourses that inform Christian women's perceptions and experiences of their sexuality.

## **DOMINANT DISCOURSE(S)**

The assumed presence of constituting discourses was a crucial departure point for this research project. I would define the term 'discourse' briefly as a belief system which constitutes our sense of reality. Different people may view the same discourse differently, as some might interpret and accept that particular discourse as 'the truth' and others might not. Usually a dominant discourse is regarded by most members of a society as the truth. Those people whose belief systems do not fall within the dominant discourse could become marginalised, especially when they reject or challenge the accepted norm. My understanding of dominant discourses which enjoy truth status was informed by Foucault's views (cited in White & Epston 1990:20). He argues that 'truth' should not be seen as absolute, as if a belief system were objective or was based on intrinsic facts. Instead, one should recognise that 'truth' consists of constructed ideas that are allotted the status of a truth. 'These "truths" are "normalizing" in the sense that they construct norms around which persons are incited to shape or constitute their lives' (White & Epston 1990:19-20). It would seem that there are many such 'truths' within a Christian religious context and that they prescribe what is regarded as acceptable sexual behaviour for Christians.

For the purposes of this research project, I argued that the dominant discourse regarding Christian women's sexuality has its origin in a particular reading of Judaic texts and that it is still perpetuated in Christian practices. Among Christians and in the Bible, there are many discourses with regard to sexuality. Some of these discourses present female

sexuality in a positive manner, but others entrench constructions regarding Christian sexuality in negativity. For the purposes of this study, I focus mainly on a number of the life-restricting or life-denying discourses which construct Christian views of sexuality. I isolated one particular religious discourse that I believe has assumed a dominant status. During my initial conversations with the participants, I shared this discourse (which I argued had assumed dominant status) with them, and all the participants agreed that this discourse has become dominant. In terms of this discourse, sexuality is perceived to be sinful and shameful; and women are painted as temptresses who seduce men into sexual acts. This discourse shrouds sexuality in a veil of secrecy and implies negativity, as Heschel (2003:155) points out:

Describing sinful behavior with metaphors of femininity, the tradition of Isaiah was continued in the Talmud and in medieval Jewish texts. Women were regarded as fountains of sexual temptation seducing even the most pious man if he were momentarily distracted from his study and prayer.

